

# The Black Box

**THE GREAT MYSTERY STORY  
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**CHAPTER XXIII.**

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

**AND if I may be permitted**

**to make the suggestion," the professor advised, "eat less chocolate. It is sweetening, I know, but it encourages thirst, and it is that which we have most to fear when we may suffer most inconvenience."**

"One, two—three—march!" Laura sang out. "Come on, everybody."

They started bravely enough, but by midday their little stock of water was gone and their feet were sorely blistered. No one complained, however, and the professor especially did his best to revive their spirits.

"The Mongars?" the Arabs cried, pointing wildly. "They attack the caravan."

The three Arabs talked together for a moment in an excited fashion.

Then, without excuse or warning,

they seized the two women to the ground, bound them, laid

them across the camels, gathering fast

and with the sudden gathering upon

them, the heat of all four

"We have come farther than I had

daared to hope, in the time," he announced. "Fortunately, I know the exact direction we must take. Keep up your spirits, young ladies. At any time we may see signs of our destination."

"Makes one sad to think of the

drunks we could have had!" Quest muttered, "Say, what's that?"

The whole party stopped short.

Before them was a distant vision of

white houses of little stunted groves

of trees, the nests of ships in the

distance.

"It's Port Said!" Quest exclaimed.

What the—where have we turned

round?" the professor said, his compass

at the Jim-Jam.

"I don't care where it is," Lenora faltered, with tears in her eyes. "I thought Port Said was a terrible place—but just now I believe it's here."

The professor turned towards them

a look of his face.

"Can't you see?" he pointed out.

"It's a mirage—a desert mirage. They are quite common at dusk."

Lenora for a moment was hysterical, and even Laura gave a little sob. Quest set his teeth and glances at the professor.

"It's a mirage near where there's a caravan out there, professor?"

"That's so," the professor agreed.

"We are coming to something all right."

They struggled on once more.

Night came and brought with it a half-soothing, half-torturing coolness.

The horizon at first was smoky to them. They slept in a fashion, but soon after dawn they were on their feet again. They were silent now, for their tongues were swollen and talk had become painful. Their walk had become a shamble, but there was one expression in each face that augured no good desire to struggle on to the last.

Suddenly Quest, who had gone a little out of his way to mount a low range of sand-hills, waved his arm furiously. He was pointing his field-glasses to his eyes. It was wonderful how that ray of hope transformed them. They hurried to where the professor was. He passed the glasses to the professor.

"A caravan!" he exclaimed. "I can see the camels and horses!"

The professor almost snatched the glasses.

"It is quite true," he agreed. "It is a caravan crossing at right angles to our direction. Come. They will save us before long."

Lenora began to sob and Laura to laugh. Both were struggling with a tendency towards hysterics. The professor and Quest marched grimly side by side. With every step they took, the arrows and the darts disappeared. Presently three or four hours later, drawn thencefrom the main body and came galloping towards them. The eyes of the little party gleamed as they saw that the foremost had a watershuttle slung around his neck. He came darting forward with arms.

"You poor people!" he cried.

"Want water?" he asked.

They almost snatched the bottle from him. It was like pouring life into their veins. They all, at the professor's instigation, drank sparingly. Quest, with a great sigh of relief, lit a cigar. "How come this adventure, this?" he declared.

The professor, who had been talking to the men in their own language, turned back towards the two girls.

"It is a caravan," he explained, "a peaceful merchant on their way to Egypt. They are halting for us and we shall be able without doubt to arrange for water and food and a camel or two horses. The man here

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